



**Committee on
Homeland Security Democrats
Bennie G. Thompson, Ranking Member**

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**Mississippi Congressmen Decry FEMA's Push to Make
Disaster Victims Apply Online for Help**

Lack of Electricity and Disaster Recovery Centers Slows and Frustrates Assistance Process

WASHINGTON –Tens of thousands of displaced Hurricane Katrina victims are still being told to register online at the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) website to receive disaster assistance although large swaths of hurricane-damaged areas still don't have electricity and other basic services. The representatives have also received reports of many problems with the agency's website.

Earlier this month, Democratic staffers of the House Homeland Security Committee learned that individuals who were able to obtain Internet access were experiencing several problems while trying to file for disaster assistance. Staffers attempted to access the site and confirmed that hurricane victims are probably facing too many hurdles when filing for disaster assistance on FEMA's website.

"It's been three weeks since the storm has passed and the devastation that Katrina has left behind on our nation's Gulf Coast is overwhelming," said Congressman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS), Ranking Member of the House Homeland Security Committee. "With all of the problems with FEMA's website, combined with the magnitude of this disaster, FEMA should have a plan that doesn't rely on electricity and computer access. We should have the resources needed to put more man power on the ground and to hire more employees to field calls. So why hasn't FEMA taken the steps needed to get the ball rolling? Now, there's another hurricane on the way. I pray that Hurricane Rita spares the people of the Texas Gulf Coast. No matter what happens FEMA will definitely have to change its tactics."

Before the thousands of disaster victims can even start the application process, they must type in a hard-to-read security code. The letters in the code are scrambled and distorted for security reasons. However, this item was difficult for staffers to read, raising the question of how senior citizens and visually impaired persons would be able to insert the correct code.

FEMA's online application process is lengthy, and applicants are reporting that the site tends to freeze up. At times, the application site did not even load correctly, forcing the applicant to start over again. Only 10 FEMA Disaster Recovery Centers are open in the entire fourth-district of Mississippi, which include the heavily damaged cities of Waveland and Pass Christian. The state's most populated city of Gulfport has just one center for its 71,000 inhabitants.

"In South Mississippi, where there's no electricity, very limited phone service, and most definitely no Internet access, FEMA representatives are handing out brochures encouraging people to make FEMA's job a little easier and call or register online to get help," added Rep. Gene Taylor (D-MS). Rep. Taylor represents Mississippi's fourth congressional district, which was heavily damaged by Katrina. "In the list of mistakes FEMA has made over the past three weeks, this ranks right near the top. It's just another sign that FEMA is out-of-touch with reality."

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